Social Adaptation of Children in a Mixed Age Group in Montessori Preschool Educational Institution

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ABSTRACT

The article explores the opportunities of children’s social adaptation in a mixed age group in one Montessori preschool educational institution in Riga, Latvia. To find answers to the set research questions, the researcher carried out the observation of eight children, interviewed two teachers working in the preschool and surveyed the parents whose children were observed. The findings indicated several problems concerning social adaptation in the mixed age group at the Montessori preschool.

KEYWORDS

Mixed Age Group, Montessori Pedagogy, Preschool Educational Institution, Social Adaptation

INTRODUCTION

We are witnesses of changes occurring in today’s world: rapid social environment changes; an increase in the amount of information, opportunities for communication and forms of work organization. Society and our knowledge about it changes more abruptly than ever before. Moreover, the world for which the current educational system was designed does not exist any longer. (Fadels et al., 2017; Garleja, 2006; Moritsugu et al., 2017). In today’s rapidly changing world one of the most essential skills that should be taught to a child is adaptation. Nowadays adaptation is a topical issue not only among adults or school children; adaptation to the environment, society and life occurs as soon as a person is born. Educational system should help students to get ready for the world that changes unremittingly, and “where one has to collaborate with people from different cultures, and be skilful to evaluate different ideas, perspectives and values” (Fadels et al., 2017, p. 8). Unfortunately, not all individuals are able to adapt to abrupt changes. Thus, it is essential to develop skills to accept new conditions, meanwhile not losing one’s individuality (Garleja, 2006).

The investigation has been focused on preschool children’s socialization in a mixed age groups because it is a common practice to divide children in groups according to their age both in preschools and schools. It is done due to assumption that children of the same age have a similar level of their intellectual development. However, the society is not divided according to age groups; thus, different generations have a possibility to share their experience and enhance the process of socialisation and communication. Division in age groups is an artificially invented principle within the education system to separate children in age group periods, considering their age group peculiarities. As a result, children just starting to attend preschool have no great chance to learn from other children who have already acquired skills and activities which newcomer students should learn. In a mixed
age group, children of different age can help any newcomer students during the process of adjustment and adaptation in preschool. Meanwhile, older children learn how to take care of the younger ones. A mixed age grouping is purposefully done for various reasons in educational institutions. Firstly, it can be done for economic or demographic reasons: too small number of children in the nearest community does not allow to form separate classes; a lack of teachers at school or preschool. Secondly, it is the choice of educational institutions likely due to their chosen pedagogical approach (Lindstrom and Lindahl, 2011). Mixed age groups are mainly used in private preschools or in private comprehensive educational institutions.

Preschool education in Latvia is provided according to an agreed standard; however, private educational institutions strive to offer alternative education options for the state education programmes, implementing various pedagogical approaches known worldwide (Waldorf pedagogy, Montessori pedagogy, Froebel educational methods, the Reggio Emilia approach, etc.). In the recent period of time the popularity of Montessori pedagogy increases among the private preschool educational institutions.

One of the principles that Montessori pedagogy applies is a mixed age grouping. There are only few studies that have explored the adaptation of preschool-aged children in mixed age groups within Montessori educational institutions in the context of Latvia. There is a study devoted to preschool-aged children and their learning of the English language using Maria Montessori’s methods (Ļubovska, 2014); Linkeviča (2012) investigated how the Montessori methods help to promote the physical development of children. Gaugere (2010) explored the adaptation of preschool-aged children in preschool, and Āboltina (2014) studied seven years old children and their social adaptation in Form 1 at school. Nevertheless, the mentioned studies did not discuss the impact of basic principles of Montessori pedagogy and they did not highlight also the significance of mixed age groups for the process of social adaptation. Therefore, this research is focused on social adaptation of children in a mixed age group in a Montessori preschool educational institution.

The Law on General Education in Latvia (see Chapter 5, Section 20, Paragraph 2) states that children should acquire the preschool education programme until the age of seven. Besides, Section 201 in Chapter 5 stresses that it is mandatory to participate in pre-primary education programmes for children from the age of five (Vispārējās izglītības likums, 1999). The legislation does not state the age when children can start attending preschool; preschool education institutions can make their own decisions. It is assumed in pedagogy that there is the following age group classification: toddlers are children from 1 to 3 years; preschool-aged children are those from 3 to 7 years (Ļubļinska, 1979). However, some children who start attending preschool in Latvia are under the age of three, and they are to face the adaptation period in preschool, too. Therefore, the researcher explored children who had started attending a preschool educational institution irrespective of their age, until the age of seven.

The aim of the research is to explore the opportunities of children’s social adaptation in a mixed age group in a Montessori preschool educational institution.

The research questions are the following:

1. What characterises the social adaptation of children in a mixed age group
2. How the principles of Montessori pedagogy help children adjusting to their mixed age group in preschool

To answer the research questions and reach the aim, the following objectives were set:

1. To identify theoretical criteria for social adaptation and apply them in the empirical study
2. To carry out two observations of children’s social adaptation - the initial observation at the beginning of semester and the recurring observation at the end of semester to find out problems concerning social adaptation and make recommendations for improving children’s social adaptation in preschool.
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